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**The Survival of Bashar al-
Assad: Geopolitics and the
Resilience of the Syrian Army**

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The Survival of Bashar al-Assad: Geopolitics and the Resilience of the Syrian Army

M K Alam

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the history and nature of the Syrian armed forces through its evolution in post-colonial era and in particular during the era of Hafez al-Assad. It analyses the history of the political events that led to the rise Hafez al-Assad and the ways in which President Assad successfully removed sectarianism from the Syrian army. It analyses some of the key figures and how they performed along a professional ethos that Assad instilled in the Syrian army. The second part of the paper will investigate the arguments relating to the resilience of the Syrian army as the only Arab army in non-stop combat mode against the Israeli forces since 1973, including during the tense period of civil war since 2012. The key battles in the Lebanese civil war are also explored and the 2003 invasion of Iraq and how Bashar al-Assad inherited a professional army with the sole purpose of guarding against external aggression from Iraq, Israel and Lebanon.



INTRODUCTION

The Syrian army has been engaged in battle on its own soil for more than four years without disintegrating as had been predicted by many commentators. Indeed it is the army of the Syrian Arab Republic (*al-Jaysh al-'Arabī as-Sūrī*) which has kept the state intact. The Syrian state institutions of which the army is the foremost guarantor have held firm in the onslaught of all the non-state actors as well as regional neighbours. How is it that the Syrian Arab Army has held together? The overwhelming factor in this has been that it is not, contrary to what most observers argue, an Alawite army. Had it been an Alawite army, it would not have been able to hang on for so long. The most prominent Chiefs of Staff and General Staff officers have been a combination of Sunni, Christian and Alawite. It has not been built upon sectarian lines or ethnic lines. To take its three major contemporary personalities, Mustafa Tlass, Fahl Jassem Frejj and the late Daoud Rajiha, they are all respectively Sunni and Greek Orthodox. The elder Tlass is now retired, but is the man who shaped the Syrian armed forces with Hafez al-Assad in the 1970s. Despite support from Russia and Iran, it is the domestic support and resilience of the Syrian Arab Army Officer Corps that has kept the important cities under the control of the Ba'ath Party and the Damascus government.

SYRIA ON A MAP

Most observers point to the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 as the defining historical moment in the country we now called the Syrian Arab Republic. However perhaps more so than any other geographic region in the world, the countries that now make up Syria, Israel, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan have their past, present and future intertwined and the weight of history and the relevance of this history is that as the centre of the world's oldest civilisations and the birthplace of the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The situation facing Syria today should not be judged by some pre-conceived abstract or concepts unrelated to reality, they must be consistent with the facts and within itself, theories must be factual, independent and retrospective. In this vein, the paper underlines the importance of geopolitics as a tool for understanding the regional strategic conflict and the functioning nature of the Syrian army.

SPACE AND UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF SPACE IN THE SYRIAN CONTEXT

One of Britain's most experienced and best boundary makers, Colonel Sir Thomas Holdich asserted that, 'geographical ignorance may cost us dearly'. Holdich was referring to the commission of which he was in charge marking the boundaries of Afghanistan – where it started and where it ended. Another geographer and army officer, Colonel Thomas Edward Lawrence, who served in a similar context in Syria, was tasked to map where Ottoman Syria started and where it ended all the way south to British-controlled Egypt. According to Lawrence the statesmen in London and Paris had discounted the geopolitical analysis of the



Levant and Mesopotamia. This relationship between geography and international relations should be the key to stability in General Karl Haushofer's view, the repetition of wrongs would not lead to a solution; it would only perpetuate conflict and let extreme ideologies breathe into the vacuum of lack of thorough geopolitical analysis. These same ideologies have taken root since the fall of the Ottoman Empire to the rise and fall of Arab nationalism to the birth of Islamic reactionary politics.

Four historical references are vital in understanding the current conflict in Syria that have shaped the psyche of not just contemporary Syrians but the inhabitants in the wider region which make up the Levant or *belad esSham* in Arabic. In the modern era the states of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel and Iraq all fall in this category. These states along with Turkey remain the ones most affected by the fallout of events currently taking place in Syria. To understand the geopolitical nature of the insurgency in Syria, cursory glances at the flashpoints of history that have led to the arrival at this critical juncture are essential.

The first of these is the Umayyad Caliphate in Damascus, which was the first great Arab empire which was an imperial state with its capital in Damascus. It was the Umayyad caliph Muawiya and his son Yazid who conducted the military operations in modern day Karbala, Iraq which massacred Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed. This event divided the Arab community and Muslim world to this day and much of the ferment today in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq revolves around this incident. The modern entities of the Ba'ath party in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Sadrists in Iraq all refer to this point in history for their grievances. The actors on the other side of the divide, i.e., the Free Syrian Army, Saudi Arabia and Qatar view this point as the beginning chapter in the struggle between the Sunni and Shia in the Middle East.

The second point which is vital to understanding current conditions is the Crusades. T. E. Lawrence understood this point when he arrived at the Syrian castle, *Krak de Chevalier* which he called the greatest castle in the world. When Lawrence arrived there as a young man he was in hostile territory of the Ottomans, and this remains contested territory even today. This marked a central strategic point for the knights who came to conquer and hold the Holy Land for Christianity: It is a central link of castles across Syria which for three centuries they held against the local Muslim population. The size of the stones, and the tens of thousands of people that built these forts, and the amount of lives and money, energy and fanaticism facilitated this kind of occupation. You could sense at *Krak de Chevalier* why the Crusades are such an astonishing phenomenon even today. It resonates so strongly that al-Qaeda-linked insurgents in Iraq used this castle and the Crusades as a reference point to drive out and indiscriminately massacre the Christians of Iraq. On the 19th of August 2012, the leading Christian priest of Syria, Patriarch of the Church of Antioch, Gregory III called for a rejection of the Free Syrian Army, and also sighted how the al-Qaeda linked Iraqi and Syrian insurgents had moved into Christian areas by force to draw fire from the regime forces and hence endanger the Christian holy places.

The third historical reference point is that the legacy left behind by Ottoman rule over what are now the states of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Israel. Ottoman rule was heavily Sunni and



discriminated against the Shia and Alawite minorities of the Levant. When the French moved in after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, they favoured these minorities along with the Christians and put them in positions of authority. The Sunnis of Syria and Lebanon accuse the Christians that they were settlers and supporters of the Crusaders of the 11th century and then the colonisers of the 20th century French. In this narrative, the Shia are alleged to have been supporters of both, as had been the case with the Ismailis and Alawi support of the Crusaders against Saladin along the coast of the Mediterranean. To this day the Shia militias of Hezbollah and Sadr curse Saladin annually; Saladin is buried in Damascus, a point not lost on the Sunnis who feel humiliated by the ruling sect in Ba'athist Syria.

The Fourth historically-relevant observation is that of the Sykes-Picot agreement which divided the Levant into British and French mandated spheres of influence after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The Syrian ambassador to the UN, Dr Jaafari, on the 1st of February 2012 brought up the relevance of this treaty and the insurgency of T.E. Lawrence to today's conflict. He compared the contemporary struggle as similar to that of WWI, when outsiders hijacked the legitimate demand of Syrians; he compared the Saudis and Qataris to the fighters of the Arab revolt that were paid and directed by the British Army. The ambassador argued that like in Versailles and Lausanne, this conflict was being decided in Doha, Riyadh and Ankara.

HISTORY, ETHNICITY AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE SYRIAN ARMY

However to understand how the Syria Army got to where it is today one has to delve into the history of the Syrian state since independence and understand how its military has shaped the state. Since March 1949 Syria has experienced sixteen military coups, nine of which were successful in overthrowing the incumbent rulers. The army had never really retreated into the barracks until the arrival of Hafez al-Assad. After independence from the French, Syria had eight years of parliamentary rule (1945-149) and (1954-1958), but after March 1963 members of the armed forces that were sympathetic to the Arab Socialist Party intervened to bring their version of parliamentary rule backed by a strong military presence to Syria.¹ Arguably, this military-Ba'th faction that has ruled Syria for the last four decades has not been an all-out dictatorship and owes its success to a combination of balance between rural and urban Syria, mercantile and tribal Syria, and the political families that were aligned to elements of the armed forces which influenced the Syrian state since its inception whether these families being leftists, Nasserites, pan-Arabists or business focussed.² The divergent business interests and feudal family politics converged on the armed forces to keep a strong stable Syria that could leverage itself over Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan.³

Whilst the French had only encouraged the non-Arabs and non-Muslims to join the army in mandate-Syria, the departure of the French changed this situation dramatically. The Homs and Hama military academies took Sunnis of all backgrounds and it was Sunnis that made up the majority of the army elite in the 1970s and 1980s. According to Patrick Seale, the Syrian army under Adib Shishakli, became an "unashamedly political instrument".⁴ However it had



done away with its mostly French policies of sectarian divisions within the army, under Hafez al-Assad this policy continued and a mixture of all classes and sects continued to join the army. Al-Assad did however begin the process of depoliticising the Syrian armed forces.

The Syrian army had always bridged the gap and the friction between the rural and urban centres of Syria and the rich and the poor.⁵ In this regard, it will be interesting to take a closer look at some of the ethnicity and religions of key figures that shaped the Syrian armed forces in the run up to the takeover by Hafez al Assad. Colonel Haydar al-Kuzbari was a Sunni who played a key role in ending the union between Egypt and Syria. General Abdel Karim Zahareddine was a Druze Chief of Staff of the armed forces and took over affairs once Syria had firmly established itself away from Egypt's grasp. Ziad al-Harriri was a Sunni head of the army and defence minister in 1963. Amin al-Hafez was another Sunni head of army and president – a Ba'athist who crushed the Sunni uprising in Hama in 1964 through aerial bombings which included attacks on mosques. Here it can be noted almost twenty years before Hafez al-Assad's raid on Hama, a Sunni head of army and atate in the shape of Amin al-Hafez had used overwhelming force to crush an Islamist-led uprising. Furthermore, in 1952 another Hama rebellion was crushed by Sunni officers under a Sunni officer from Hama, Adib Shishakli.⁶ Mustafa Tlass himself testifies to the non-sectarian nature of the armed forces in the role he played in crushing three Hama rebellions by the Syrian armed forces spread over three decades.⁷ Abdel Karim al-Nahlwai, another officer who played an instrumental role in Damascus' decision to bring Syria out of Egypt's clutches was also a Sunni.

The Ba'athists had taken the mantle of educating the army officers throughout the 1970s,⁸ and since then the Syrian military has ruled through a praetorian-patrimonial model rather than an outright parliamentary executive power. The army had to adapt from not just being a military force but also the political guardian of the country. Assad turned the military into a unified force and set about professionalising the army and ironically at the same time managed the chaos of Lebanon which was completely based on sectarian fault lines.⁹ There were as many inter-Alawi intrigues as non-Alawi.¹⁰ The Syrian army lost its monopoly on political power during the regime of President Hafiz al-Assad as he knew how to control the armed forces. As Hinnebusch has also noted, sectarianism and ethnicity have never been the driving features of the Syrian military.¹¹ Indeed, in his famous book, *The Policy of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa*, Manfred Halpern presented the officers' corps as representing the new salaried middle class that emerged in the Arab world as the result of the modernisation process. This class also includes teachers, administrators in the civil service and government apparatus, technicians, high school and university professors, journalists, lawyers and others. These observations help, at least in part, in understanding the Ba'ath revolution.¹²

The Ba'ath party has continued to provide an ideological and organisational base common to all the forces which play a role in Syrian politics: The bureaucrats of the party, government and civil service, as well as senior army officers. It has branches in the army units and security forces, which send representatives to the senior party institutions. And senior members of the armed forces are members in such institutions as the Central Committee *al*



Lajna al-Markaziyya) and Regional Command (*al-Qiyada al-Qutriyya*), alongside party bureaucrats.¹³

To further demonstrate the non-sectarian nature of the Syrian military high command one must also look at a pivotal moment which defines the Syrian military to this day in the midst of the civil war. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s there was tremendous external pressure on Syria, none more so than from Iraq, Israel and Egypt. All three threats were different: Egypt wanted to subdue Syria through the guise of the Arab Union Republic. Iraq and its Ba'ath wing were supporting several different factions within Syria in order to bring its party and military under their own control; and Israel was and still remains in a state of war with Syria. Amidst all this there were the coups and counter coups within the military and government. Hafez al-Assad and Mustafa Tlass decided that given the external threats, the military, above all, must have a nationalist agenda and an institution devoid of politics.¹⁴ It was this strategy, developed by Tlass and Assad, which led to near complete purge of politics from the military and a separation of power, not seen before in Syria.

Hafez al-Assad also brought in senior members of the Syrian air force into the military high command. Naji Jamil (Sunni) served as Air Force Commander from 1970 to 1978 and was promoted to General Staff committee overseeing defences on the Iraq border. Another Air Force Commander, Mohammed al-Khuli, was until 1993 controlled the coveted logistic positions between Damascus and Lebanon. These last commanders at the top at the time of Hafez al-Assad's death included the Air Force Security Administration headed by Ibrahim Huwayji, non-air force commanders Hasan Khalil, Ali Duba, Ali Mamlouk and Hikmat Shihabi.¹⁵ Other prominent officers above the rank of Brigadier in military and civil defence positions post-2000 are Sunnis, including Rustum Ghazaleh, Hazem al-Khadra and Deeb Zaytoun. Since 1973 the strategic tank battalions of the 70th armoured brigade stationed near al-Kiswah (near Damascus) have had rank and file Alawis under command of Sunni officers.¹⁶

By the time Hafez al-Assad passed on the army to his son Bashar, the Syrian military had firmly lost its sectarian beginnings which were very much a legacy of French colonial rule. The deft play between rural and urban, tribal and religious sects was evened out through an education system played on party lines rather than religion. The stage had also been set for the removal of military officers from main stream politics. Instead, the family structure of Syria would be co-opted into the party whilst the army would remain stable and neutral. In contrast, few Arab countries have armies based on professionalism; most are based on tribal structure, importance of family lineage and religion. In Syria, the last forty years have shown that the army is not a sectarian military force. Most of the internal politics within the army had been rooted out with power and promotion and performance in the field. Even during the most critical time of the late 1960s and early 1970s there was a good balance of Sunni and Alawi officers.¹⁷ Interestingly, not all the Alawis supported Salah Jadid whilst prominent Sunni officers such as Lietuenal Colonel Ahmad Suwaydani from Houran supported Jadid.¹⁸ The most promising test came when Hafez al-Assad lay sick and his brother tried to make a move for power. Hafez categorically left day to day affairs of the state in the hands of an all



Sunni cast, with Mustafa Tlass, Abdallah al-Ahmar, Hikmat Shihabi, Abd al-Rauf al Kasm and Zuhayr Mashariqah in charge. Furthermore, prominent Alawis at the time such as Ali Hayder, Ibrahim Safi and Ali Douba decided not to side with Rifaat al-Assad despite his offers of shared power.¹⁹

COUNTER-INSURGENCY LESSONS

As we witness the Syrian army battle its way to victory in key towns such as Qusayr and Yabroud, along with making strategic gains in Aleppo and the suburbs of Damascus, it is again important to look at how and where the Syrian military honed its fighting skills.

The Syrian army, along with its military and civilian intelligence forces, has mastered the art of dividing its opponent (insurgent) unlike any other army. Syria dominated Lebanon for decades not through brute force but cunning power plays and an understanding of geography and history. Take into account the three contemporary battles of Qusayr, Yabroud and Maloula. All three hold their strategic and symbolic values: Two were the supply route towards Lebanon and the Mediterranean as well as being great vantage points, whilst the other is the most important Christian town for Arabs along with Bethlehem. In Maloula, the local residents joined in the fighting alongside of the Syrian army against the rebels. This meant clearing the area of the foreign insurgents. This a tactic right out of the Syrian army's days of operating in Lebanon, where they cleared areas with the tacit approval of local people whether they were Christian, Sunni or Shia. In Qusayr, despite the presence of Hezbollah, it was the Syrian army that did the bulk of the fighting. Hezbollah were only there to protect the Shia villages on the Lebanese side, and then they crossed into Syria to protect Shia civilians. These successes demonstrated how the Syrian army units were always imbedding locals into their operations. But the roots of these modern battles lay in the Syrian army's performance in Lebanon in the 1980s.

Looking back on the Lebanese experience, Syria formed its policies on the premise that Israel's main political objective for going into Lebanon was to crush the PLO, in which it succeeded with overwhelming odds and ease in the 1980s. However, its second objective of removing Syria's military presence in the Bekaa valley and reduce its influence in Lebanon was its greatest and only failure since its birth in 1948.²⁰ The Israeli plan for Lebanon to combat Syria called for the seizing of Lebanese territory up to and including Beirut, which would be taken in a coordinated operation with the Phalange forces; an advance beyond the Beirut-Damascus highway, which would cut off Beirut from the main Syrian forces; and the expulsion of Syrian units from the Bekaa valley. One would expect that this plan would entail deep penetrations, landings north of Beirut and the Beirut-Damascus highway, and other tactical manoeuvres of the type espoused in IDF doctrine. Syria's ability to counter Israel's strategic objectives provides lessons for understanding the battles the Syrian military has been involved in since the start of the civil war. Indeed, a careful analysis of key strategic battles between the Israelis and the Syrians will help in explaining the Syrian army's performance in recent years.



In 1982 the Syrian presence in Lebanon had diminished from three divisions in 1976 to one division and one mixed brigade which amounted to 30,000 men. The 1st Armoured Division in the Bekaa, commanded by Rifaat al-Assad was deployed in defensive positions in depth. Both Syrian formations and doctrine followed the Soviet model, and defensive doctrine called for combined-arms operations, combat teams whose structure was fixed in advance, and a defence based on massive firepower. To provide firepower, the Syrians depended on air defence in depth by various SAM sites reinforced by anti-aircraft guns, and a ground defence force characterised by a profusion of anti-tank weapons and units. The defence would depend on intensive fortifications and exploitation of natural obstacles to a depth of 20-30 kilometres. The 85th Brigade was deployed in the Beirut area in an armed presence role, with the additional task of securing the Beirut-Damascus highway.

In addition to the main armies of Syria and Israel, Lebanese militias would become involved in the fighting. The Israelis expected the Christian Lebanese Forces, some 10,000 strong, to fight as allies against the PLO. As war neared, the opponents consisted of some seven divisions and two independent brigades of the IDF, 60,000-78,000 strong, arrayed against 15,000 PLO fighters, one Syrian armoured division, and one Syrian brigade. The main battle at the end of the war was how well the Syrian and Israelis would manage their allies in the form of irregular forces. The main battles of 10 June, 1982 were fought in the Eastern Sector, between the IDF and the Syrian 1st Armoured Division. Ground Syrian resistance had been stiff. The Syrians defended a series of strong points along the winding roads. Each strongpoint conducted a separate, integrated defence with obstacles, mines, tanks, and commandos using Sappers and RPGs; at times, such as in the defence of the crossroads near Lake Qaraoun, the defence was supported by artillery and by Gazelle helicopters using HOT missiles.

At dawn, Syria commandos attacked. IDF APCs and tanks were hit and caught fire and men were killed trying to rescue the wounded from burning vehicles. Finally, Brigadier Menachem Einan ordered a cessation of rescue attempts and the column retreated in reverse gear.

Around 23:00, this force approached Ein Zhalta, some eight kilometres from the Beirut-Damascus highway but more than 20 by road. Unknown to the Israelis, the area around Ein Zhalta was defended by a brigade-strength Syrian force consisting of a few dozen tanks and commando units. After passing through the villages, the Israelis started descending a steep slope with tanks in the lead when the Syrians opened fire with tanks from the opposite ridge and RPGs and Sappers from the surrounding *wadis*. The Israeli attacks on Syrian positions in the Bekaa brought Syrian reaction in the west. There, Syrian forces had remained in Beirut and out of the fighting, but now the 85th Brigade began to deploy tank and commando teams south and east of Beirut – around Khalde and the hills south of Beirut and along the Shemlan ridge area.

In June 1982 the Israeli Air Force had jammed and destroyed the Syrian radar and bombed the surface-to-air missiles (SAM) sites in the Bekaa valley. However despite the overwhelming odds they Syrian army fought on; the Israeli charge from the south was



checked with ferocity when the IDF came into contact with Syrian positions. The IDF reported heavy obstacles inch for inch. An IDF armoured column was halted in a fierce tank battle in the village of Sultan Yacoub. This prevented the Israelis from taking the vitally strategic Beirut-Damascus highway that cut across the Bekaa valley.²¹ The IDF was also halted towards the southern approach to Beirut at Khalde. The Syrian army backed different groups to obstruct the Israeli advance east of Beirut.²² Al-Saiqa fighters and other Shia- Sunni groups backed by regular units from the Syrian army fought the IDF to a standstill in 1983. The Israelis retreated to the Litani river, and aimed to avoid contact with the Syrian forces at all cost.

These battles would be forgotten in Western military literature but for the Syrians today and their General Staff officers they formed the basis for the next war with Israel through irregular forces. Hence the performance of the Syrian forces today is a culmination of the study of the 1980s battles which joined irregulars with the main Syrian army. Syria never suffered from lack of courage or will to fight on.²³ Even though they knew they could not stand up to IAF in 1982 they flew near suicide missions with great commitment and skill.²⁴

The American appraisal of Syrian troops summarised that the Syrians had returned to Beirut after the withdrawal of the Israelis, but they were no more able to establish order than were the Americans and Israelis before them. Nevertheless, it may be that the Syrian presence in Lebanon will prove so important as to stand out as the one thing which prevented any radical change to Lebanon's form of government, for despite Syrian support for Iran in its conflict with Iraq, Syria had no interest in seeing a Shia Islamic government in Lebanon and would rather maintain some form of the status quo. The Americans saw Syria as the only party with whom they could deal with concerning Lebanon and that situation was better served than having factional anarchy for the Israelis as well, as of course for the Lebanese population too.²⁵

SYRIAN ARMY AS A NON-CONVENTIONAL FORCE

Similar to the American assessment of the Syrian army control of Lebanon was that of the Israelis. The Israeli government came to the conclusion that they had nothing to gain in destabilising Syria under Assad; in the end it would likely bring a Sunni Islamic government to power. It would be more of a war in which there shall not be a zero sum option but rather in which both sides lose relative ground and the ability to operate.²⁶ After arguably being out done in Lebanon by Syrian forces and its proxies, the Israelis now saw the wisdom of letting Syria have hegemony to maintain the status quo of the Golan Heights. This doctrine was further entrenched after the 2006 war in Lebanon.

In the aftermath of the 33-day war in 2006, Syria sent commandos and artillery units to the border and the IDF raised its level of military readiness to the maximum in ten years and doubled its deployment on Mount Hermon.²⁷ Syria had also doubled its commando units in 2007 and started preparing for urban guerrilla warfare training.²⁸ One of the 12 divisions of



Syrian army was made of 10,000 elite commandos and the same unit doubled the number of rockets in its possession.²⁹

Taking the longer time in mind, Israel had to accept that the Syrian forces had made surprising advances against the Israelis in the Golan in 1973 and resisted the Israeli advances in Lebanon in 1982.³⁰ The assumption that the power and effectiveness of the Syrian military had been corrupted so as not to able it to mount any sort of fighting force proved misplaced. More than anything, the Syrian forces' helicopters proved significantly proficient and their commando units effective in absorbing mechanised frontal assaults by the IDF. The remarkable success gained by Hezbollah in 2006 confirmed the transition of Syrian forces from a conventional fighting force to one capable of undertaking asymmetric warfare, and the irregular forces which it had trained proved able to compensate for the conventional superiority of the IDF and its vulnerability to irregular warfare techniques.³¹

The Israeli strategic expert Ephraim Inbar remarked: "in the recent strategic acumen of the Syrian military Israel has absolute superiority in several fields in warfare so Syria is investing in fields where it can have an edge. It has invested in recent years in anti aircraft weapons rockets missiles and bunkers. The war in Lebanon proved to the Syrians that they were right to do so".³²

The grudging respect the Israelis have had for the Syrian armed forces trumps all other armies in the region with respect to threats to Israel. Israel not only saw the importance of the irregular forces that Syria could unleash but also the negative consequences of removing the Syrian state and army from the Lebanese theatre. Israel of course had long considered the domestic consequences of political change in Syria and when Silvan Shalom, the Israeli foreign minister in 2004, suggested to Ariel Sharon to adopt a strategy of destabilisation of the Syrian regime, Sharon replied by saying that would merely result in an extremist Sunni government emerging in Syria, or an unstable democracy, both of which would be a threat to Israel's security.³³

Upon the death of Hafez al-Assad, Vice President Abd-al Halim Khaddam, serving as temporary acting president, promulgated two decrees, first announcing the appointment of Bashar al-Assad, the late president's son, as the General Commander of the Syrian armed forces, in addition to his being promoted to the rank of Fariq, the most senior rank which his father had held. Just hours later and in a public show of support, Bashar received members of the senior officers' corps, headed by Defence Minister Mustafa Tlass and Chief of the General Staff (CGS) Ali Aslan who came to offer their condolences on the death of his father, as well pledging their loyalty and complete support for their new military leader. Again to return to a topic mentioned earlier in this paper, were the Syrian Armed Forces a sectarian unit it would make sense the Sunni Tlass to provoke trouble. However it was the two main Sunnis in the regime namely Khaddam and Tlass that oversaw the smooth transition of power to Bashar al-Assad.



CONCLUSION

If a Lebanese woman gets pregnant they say the Syrians did it, if a bird falls out from the sky over Beirut it is said to have been attacked by the Syrian eagle.³⁴ Of course the eagle and the lion have come to symbolise the Levant for the last four decades in the shape of the Syrian state built by Hafez al-Assad, and the one being kept alive by his son Bashar. What has come to motivate the Syrian armed forces and state to resist all that has been thrown at it in the last few years? The answer, in my assessment, lies in the formidable network built by Hafez al-Assad's army in Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq. This is the very same network we have seen at play in Iraq post-2003 and in Lebanon post-1976. As former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger famously remarked "you can't make war in the Middle East without Egypt and you can't make peace without Syria".

As commentators in 2015 struggle to make sense of Syria and its regime, few have bothered to look at the performance of the Syrian forces in Lebanon post-1976. It is noteworthy that it was a great relief to the Americans and the Israelis that the Syrian army sanctioned by the Arab League marched into Lebanon in 1976 on behalf of the Christian community there to fight the anarchist Palestinians who had earlier destabilised Jordan and were doing the same in Lebanon. It was the Syrian army that along with Israel had a tacit agreement that anything north of the Litani river belonged to the Syrian sphere of influence and the rest to Israel. So we move to the 80s and 90s and Syria becomes the guarantor of peace in not just Lebanon but also the greater Levant region. How the Syrian army and intelligence forces skilfully played off one group against the other in Lebanon to bring about their mastery over the country and then replayed the same in Iraq post-2003 is indeed worth remembering. In Iraq, Syria's armed forces and intelligence officers successfully outwitted the coalition forces and indeed Iran in backing the Sunni insurgents who came to fight from the north and east of Syria. At the same time, the Syrians maintained excellent relations with the Shia Sadr brigades based in southern Iraq.

This was the same Syrian military that throughout the 1970s and 1980s kept a precarious balance between different Lebanese Christian families of Chamoun, Gemayael and Frangieh. This is the same Syrian military that for years actually ideologically supported the moderate Amal party of the Shias and not Hezbollah. The greatest Christian general of Lebanon, Michel Aoun, who was the quintessentially anti-Syrian of the 1990s, became the Syrians' biggest ally following Syrian withdrawal in 2005. Put simply, when Aoun bothered the Syrians, they simply backed other Christian warlords in Mount Lebanon and thus fragmented the Lebanese Christians, and as a result came out on top.

So the dexterity displayed at deflecting all allegations of assassinations and being the root cause for all problems in Lebanon and Iraq have served the Syrian army well in the ongoing conflict in Syria. In analysing these significant episodes can we understand the Syrian army's policy of 'no vanquished and no conqueror'. As we see the drift of the Syrian rebels into splinter groups of hundreds of factions, and even reports of how the Syrian army pays al-Nusra for the flow of oil, it is a lesson all too familiar for those who have watched the Machiavellian politics of the Syrian military establishment at work. Reports of Farouk Sharaa



and Ali Habib's defections have now been proven to be fabricated. The chess played in the Levant first termed as the 'Syrian belt' by Seymour Hersh is one whose actors are the Syrian security forces. From Mount Lebanon to Damascus, there is a history of Syrian state and army at work on the ground. Alan George in his book concludes that although the hopes of reform invested in the young President Bashar al-Assad were probably exaggerated, "he might yet succeed in launching a programme of limited political reform if the west, through support for an aggressive Israel and swaggering threats against Syria, does not perpetuate the conditions that allowed the most anti-democratic wing of the Syrian regime to prevail over the pro-democracy activists".³⁵ Arguably with the coming of the conflict to Syria Bashar al-Assad did not have sufficient time to continue what he started in 2000, namely the gradual reform process that many in the West witnessed up close between 2000 and 2010.³⁶ The Syrian military has evolved into a unified non-sectarian force and while many observers point to undoubted prowess of Hezbollah in the battlefield it is worth noting, as this paper does, that it had been the Syrian forces which had been the main force facing Israel for years.³⁷ The Syrian army remains a formidable force, despite huge internal and external pressures. It has evolved as an institution to outlast sectarian fault lines and negative foreign influences.³⁸ Before ISIL had caught the attention of Western headlines, the Syrian Air Force was the first to strike out against them at least four months before Western airstrikes.³⁹ The Iraqi prime minister publicly expressed as far back as June stated his gratitude to Syria for coming to the aid of encircled Iraqis in the north and west of the country.⁴⁰ This was at the time when the United States had apparently balked at the idea of the delivering the F-16 fighter jets that Iraq had already paid for. The Air War had been raging in Iraq well before it caught the attention of NATO powers. Arguably, for reasons discussed, there is only one credible fighting force on the ground that is capable of confronting and defeating ISIL and that is the Syrian military.



Notes

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